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ABSTRACT

A high school English teacher assigned to a class of underachieving eleventh grade students encountered numerous difficulties with the students' behavior and their resistance to writing. Most were disruptive in class, hostile to reading and writing assignments, and had troubled home lives. To combat the problem, the teacher developed a hierarchical scale of the students' needs based on Maslow's theory that basic needs precede higher development. The students appeared to need (1) an orderly, reliable, trustworthy environment; (2) control of their own behavior; and (3) a willingness to interact with the environment before they could begin to work on self-awareness, goal-setting, and writing skills. To establish a trustworthy environment, dialogue journals were implemented that established ongoing, one-on-one conversations between teacher and student. In the journals, students discussed, among other things, their lives outside of school, their work in class, and what they felt about reading assignments. The journals showed students that their ideas would be taken seriously and made them more comfortable with writing frequently. A second strategy, a point system, gave students immediate feedback about their progress in class and alleviated confusion about how grades were assigned. The point system and the journals proved to be very effective, as indicated by higher student grades at the end of the semester. In addition, the teacher learned from the students when best to intervene, that a relationship based on trust that also modeled the writing process elicited the most positive responses, and that the objective system of behavioral guidelines neutralized negative interactions. (Three references are included.) (JC)

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WHERE DOES THE TEACHER INTERVENE WITH UNDERACHIEVING WRITERS?

by Belinda McGuire

It seemed to me that the whole class was falling down around me. It was the first Friday in October, the day for issuing interims (our county's name for midterm warnings to students earning D's and F's). In my class of twenty-one eleventh-grade underachieving English students, eleven were receiving interims.

When the students came in, there was a cloud of anxiety hanging over all of us. Sam hovered over my opened records. In a frantic voice, he said, "How could I be getting an F? I did all that extra credit."

That was the cue for the group protest. The grumblings and accusations started.

"You didn't give us enough time."

"You lost my papers."

"You said I could turn it all in today."

"You said...."

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This scenario was not what I had envisioned when school started. I had been excited about a new phase of research. This was my second year as a teacher-researcher and my third year as a teacher-consultant with the Northern Virginia Writing Project at George Mason University. I was

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investigating how underachieving students gained control over their writing.

I had worked with underachievers many times before in my twelve years of teaching, and I thought I was prepared to teach them. I was joined by the school's resource teacher for underachieving students who was also conducting a research project.

But still, I was unprepared for the tremendous difficulties I was having with this particular group. Our time together was riddled with disagreements and misunderstandings. I began to wonder if I were losing my touch. I could see that I needed a whole new approach this year to overcome the confusion and communication problems we were experiencing.

Instead of dealing with willing learners who had a basic sense of security and trust in the academic system, I was dealing with students who came with anti-academic values and a basis distrust of schools in general. In their journals, they wrote the following kinds of comments. (In these and other student quotes, I have retained the students' original wording, spelling, and punctuation).

> Yesterday I didn't come to school because I didn't feel like it. And I am gitting sick and tired of school

> When I was in junior high school, I had fun

because I had a lot of friends and we use to skip class and things like that.

I don't Like math because I fail last year because I got Kick out of class and it to much work.

Many responded to school as if it were a chaotic and unreliable place. They had failed to gain the kind of control over their behavior which is usually considered necessary for success in school. Many did not exhibit even a willingness to interact positively with the school. It was becoming clear to me that before I could pursue the original purpose of my research--seeing how underachievers develop inner control over their writing--I needed to describe and somehow come to grips with the phenomenon of these students in school and see what would have a positive effect on their writing.

What Characterized These Students As Underachievers?

These students were hardly ready to explore their own development as writers. Their educational foundations stones were still unsettled and shakey. The students selected to be in this class scored in the thirtieth percentile or lower on their standardized tests.

1. They were writing-resistant. Their writing processes seemed to be confused and they had very primitive and underdeveloped writing skills.

Just getting them to write at all was difficult. At the beginning of the year I asked them to tell me in their journals what happened when they wrote. Those who responded made such comments as:

"Nothing."

"I don't know."

"I can't think of anything."

"Who cares."

Many did not respond to the question at all.

Most of their written comments were sparse and short. Frequently, they were off the point and difficult to understand.

2. They had problems with the other basic language arts skills of reading, speaking, and listening. The basic literature text was one that I had used successfully with other low achievers. It was edited to provide high interest and easy reading, yet many of these students would not read it on their own. They were reluctant to discuss themes or ideas in the literature, and they seemed comfortable only with basic factual questions about plot and other superficial information. Their listening skills were limited and they were often confused about the specifics of

assignments.

3. Their attention spans were short. It was difficult to get them to focus on classwork. I remember one day, typical of our early weeks together, when one of the boys brought several hundred prize cards from one of the local merchants. The class period disintegrated into a struggle over which would occupy our attention--prize cards or the lesson. I am sorry to say that the prize cards won.

4. They thought in simplified black-and-white terms, and they were resistant to new experiences and ideas. They seemed to be isolated from input that would alter their preconceived notions. For a variety of reasons, their conceptions about most thing seemed to generate from the inside of their own heads and backgounds with little influence from the teachers or the immediate environment.

They had few social problem-solving skills or ways of devising alternative solutions to problems. We asked them to write an ending to a little scenario which could result in either a conflict or a creative compromise. The scene started like this:

Jack and George walked into the classroom.

Jack was wearing headphones and listening to his radio. George wanted the headphones and radio. He asked Jack if he could use them and Jack said, 'No!" What happened?

All of the students except two said that an argument erupted. The fight ended when one boy had beaten up or killed the other and had taken the set for himself. Several said the set was destroyed during the fight. Here are two samples of students' responses:

Jack hit George and George Look at him and pull out a gun and shot him. He dead Now. Now George still have his radio and plus money from Jack pocket.

George hit Jack and he fell down with the walkman and broke. Jack pulled out a staleto flicks the button and the blade came out, them Jack stabbed George and then he died.

Only one boy suggested any intervention from an outsider, a person who was characterized as a tough, unsympathetic, punishing authority figure. One other student suggested that the boys talked and decided to cooperate and share the set. This particular student was very quiet. He sat in the back corner and rarely interacted with the others.

How Did These Students' Personal Problems Affect Their Classroom Performance?

These young people's lives abounded with personal problems--problems which they often brought into class with them, problems which they had to deal with along with the pressures of being students. Of the twenty-one students, nineteen were boys (ten from racial minorities) and two were girls (both from racial minorities). Two of our students were known to be extreme attendance problems. Three were learning disabled students, and one was extremely bright if not gifted, although his standardized test scores did not reflect his abilities. Several had been uprooted from their native countries--one from southern Europe and one from an Asian country. One student was illiterate in his native language when he arrived.

Several students were in need of medical attention. One needed an unaffordable $5,000 operation to correct a hearing loss, and one needed physical therapy for a tendon in his hand which had been injured in a knife fight with his older brother. One student was an unwed parent struggling to meet the financial demands of supporting a young child.

Several students had records of threats and violence. One young man had been removed from a class the year before for threatening to hit the teacher. Needless to say, I was quite concerned about his reaction when he got his "F"

interim. During this encounter, his face grew pale and his jaw rigid. He did not say anything. He just got up and walked silently to the back of the room. Then he took all of his papers out of his folder, tore them up, and said over and over, "I hate this class and I hate that teacher."

Another fellow told me that he was once turned in to the office for having a knife in class. He also told me that he had ignored a subpoena to give evidence about the theft of a policeman's gun.

In one case, a student threatened violence in his journal saying ". . .one day I am going to get mad and just kill one of you all damn people." We decided this situation was serious enough that we needed to take it to an administrator. The three of us had a private conference with this young fellow. We found out that he was despondent about many things, including the fact that he had lost his job two weeks before and was not able to continue contributing to the support of his family.

One of our students was removed from school before the end of the year for displaying a weapon in the presence of other students and adults. More than one of these young people had spent a night in jail for one offense or another.

There were some minor but unpleasant racial and sexual slurs between the minority groups. One young man was awkward and clumsy in his behavior toward both of the girls. He made suggestive overtures toward one, and cutting remarks such as "Get rid of that garlic smell" to the other.

Another student often talked of a fascination with drugs, death, cults, and Satan worship. This young man's arms and hands bore scars and fresh scabs where he had carved initials and symbols into them. When we gave the students folders to keep their journals in, this fellow opened one of his fresh scabs and decorated the cover with designs in blood.

For all their exposure to worldly and difficult situations, they could be surprisingly sensitive and empathetic. We showed the class Cypher In the Snow, a movie that deals with the death of a boy who had been ignored by everyone. When the camera showed the family standing beside the boy's open grave, one young man banged his fist so hard on the desk that he bounced in his seat. He turned around, looked at me and said, "That jerk didn't even go to the funeral." The father's absence was something that I had not even noticed.

What Guides Our Decisions About Interventi on?

As I look back over my own journal entries during those trying early months, I see how I groped to understand my students and their special needs. I can trace a gradual recognition of the issues we needed to deal with and a search for their solutions. These students were a very long way away from reaching what I considered to be a primary goal of the language arts curriculum--gaining control over writing.

I kept asking myself what made them so different from

the students I had taught the year before, students who said to me such things as:

> When I write I become very involved in the situation. I play a part in the story. It's like I'm really there.

and

> When I write my brain sends words into my hand and I write. I am constantly thinking when I write.

Last year's students had been able to achieve an awareness of their own cognitive processes--a kind of self-awareness as learners and writers. They had assumed the responsibility for setting writing goals for themselves and devising plans for reaching them (McGuire, 1986). But this year's students wanted nothing to do with either writing or looking at themselves objectively.

I felt as if I were asking that old question of which came first--the chicken or the egg. They seemed to have no faith that they could master writing; consequently, they were unwilling to enter into activities that would teach them how. They needed the experience of success in order to know that they could achieve, yet they remained unsuccessful because they would not participate.

Why, I would ask myself on those journal pages, did classroom management issues, authority issues and group dynamics issues continue to dominate the agenda. The

particular combination of personalities and the resulting social issues overwhelmed our class for a long time. The whole struggle over authority and limit-setting seemed to me like a struggle between parents and children. One young man delighted in pitting my partner and I against each other. For instance, he would tell each of us that the other had said he could do things that we had not in fact said.

More than once I wrote in my journal of the need I felt for a sense of "community" in this class. I began to sense that the trust issue had to be dealt with before we could get on to any other meaningful business. If the students would not or could not trust us, how could they absorb any help from us?

In pondering the issue of trust, I was reminded of Maslow's hierarchy to which I had been exposed in college. I had dim recollections of learning that people who were cold, wet, hungry or threatened could not advance to higher levels of intellectual or emotional development until their primary and basic needs were met (Maslow, 1943). Were my students telling me that something was missing in their development, that somehow some very basic needs had not been met and that they were stranded in a kind of developmental limbo?

As I sorted out these questions, I began to think through the order in which the development of student writers takes place. I drew on my twelve years of teaching and my two years as a teacher researcher. On the bottom of the

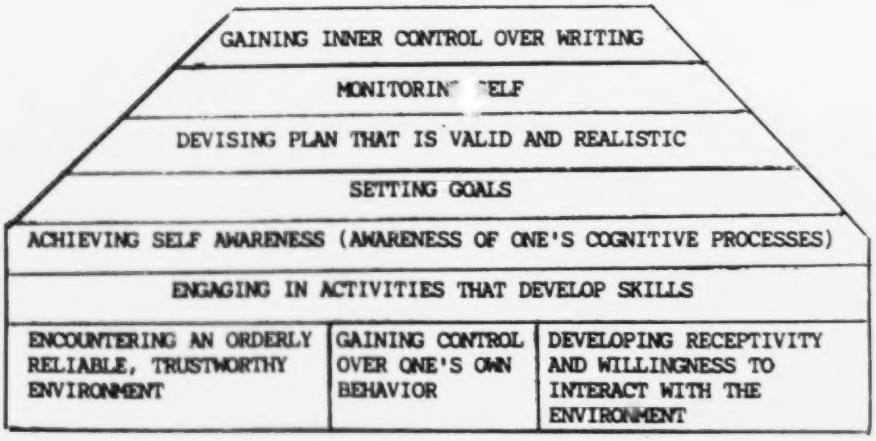
writing hierarchy, I could see three foundation stones:

1) encountering an orderly, reliable, trustworthy environment
2) gain ing control over one's own behavior (that is, behaving in a way that will not cause disruption in one's own learning)
3) developing receptivity and willingness to interact with the learning environment.

Once those three foundation stones are in place, the individual can engage in activities that will develop the skills needed for success.

On the next step, I would place self awareness (awareness that one has cognitive processes and some recognition of what they are). Next I would place goal setting by the student, followed by a valid, realistic plan for reaching that goal. Following this, I would place self monotoring. On the highest step would be gaining inner control over writing.

If I were to draw this hearachy,it would look something like this:


GAINING INNER CONTROL OVER WRITING
MONITORIN ELF
DEVISING PLAN THAT IS VALID AND REALISTIC
SETTING GOALS
ACHIEVING SELF AWARENESS (AWARENESS OF ONE'S COGNITIVE PROCESSES)
ENGAGING IN ACTIVITIES THAT DEVELOP SKILLS
ENCOUNTERING AN ORDERLY RELIABLE, TRUSTWORTHY ENVIRONMENT
GAINING CONTROL OVER ONE'S OWN BEHAVIOR
DEVELOPING RECEPTIVITY AND WILLINGNESS TO INTERACT WITH THE ENVIRONMENT

It seems to me that an individual's progress through the writing hierarchy is not unlike an individual's progress through Maslow's hierarchy. We cannot achieve higher levels of learning and performance if our basic needs for security and trust have not been met. It seems to me that not only does the classroom have to provide that security, but also the learner has to recognize somewhere in his being that the basic security and trustworthiness exists, and he has to allow himself to be receptive to that environment and willing to interact with it. Some students come to us with that sort of acceptance already in place, and they are ready to move ahead. But some, for whatever reasons, do not. I felt that my challenge as a teacher of writing was to meet these students at the point at which their growth and progress through the hierarchy was stalled.

Communication and Writing Came Through Dialoque Journals

Dialoque journals proved to be the most significant means of establishing communication and trust. I had used dialoque journals in various ways with other classes, and had found them to be useful both for keeping up with students' learning and for organizing class management procedures (McGuire, 1985). As we talked over the needs of the class, these journals seemed to be an ideal tool for getting the students to become involved with us in a positive way and to experience the usefulness of writing.

We found that these journals were uniquely adaptable to almost any situation in the classroom. We always had an ongoing discussion with each student. Sometimes we asked for focused entries on literature, and sometimes we asked for feedback on situations that developed in the classroom. Each week, we asked them to appraise their own participation or evaluate themselves and their performance. There were times when we asked them to think "outloud" as they worked their way through a particular problem. Sometimes we asked them to write about whatever they wanted. Each day we would respond to their ideas.

There was a progression to the dialoques we had. The first objective was to engage these students in conversation. Here are some early samples from several journals:

Teacher: Lamont, you've got me in suspense. Who is the man you've drawn on the

front of the folder?

Student: The man on the front of the folder is some black man what a big box philly and a Geroge town sweatsude and he is black.

Teacher: How was your weekend?

Student: My weekan was fun. I went to the movie and thin I went to a reastant. this to men got to fights in the reastant. The black man won. And that was it.

Once we gained their attention through the written word, we could see the beginnings of trust and openness develop. In the following bit of dialoque, Gerald's underlying question seems to be "Are you really listening to what I say or are you just leading me on?" We were able to demonstrate to them that we did take them seriously and that they could count on us to make an honest reply.

Gerald: I think pressure is a figment of the imagination, and that it can be abolished by the subconscious.

Pressure to me is no more than blinking you eyes to you.

I don't know if you will read this or not but if you do here is a question for you. Why don't we write of better more interesting things like powers of the subconscious and how to acquire them; or death and what it mean to us as individuals.

? Death ?

Teacher: Gerald, you really made me stop and think with some of your comments. First of all, we really are going to read what you write, and we are going to write back to you. I'd like to hear more about your ideas on the powers of the subconscious mind. What have yuour experiences been? (By the way, what does "? Death ?" mean?)

As quickly as we could, we invited the students to become a part of their own evaluation. Here are two excerpts from journals:

Teacher: How do you think things have been going for you in class this week?

Student #1: I have miss one day this week and it was my fault. I been doing good in class participation. It getting shorter from writting too much.

Teacher: How do you think things have been going for you this past week?

Student #2: In this past week I have achieved more in this class than any other one. I feel that I still need a lot of work and need to grow in writing. My writing has changed greatly since the beginig of these diolouge writing.

Once they were comfortable talking about themselves, we were able to lead them into using their own experience to work with the subject matter. Here are several more excerpts from journals:

Teacher: We are going to be writing poems that express feelings soon. Why don't you think about the times when you have been really happy. What was going on and how did you feel?

Student #1: I feel that I am happiest when

I am fishing. I have to have all
of the supplies of my trip too.
The fish have to be biting pretty good,
to: peferably catfish. And
everybody else with my party won't
be catching anything.

Student #2: I feel if that (boy in the movie)
was one of my friends I would of
help him out and when those boy
push him I would of @!!* them up.
The movie was very good.

Teacher: What did you think of the speech by
Sojourner Truth? Can you tell
anything about her personality from
her picture?

Student #3: In this picture the lady Look
she use to be a slave. A long time a go.
Now she is free. The reason why
she took this picture is because
she want people to Know she was
black a proud of it.

I could see two changes occurring within the class from the use of these dialogue journals. First, writing was

happening each day. For writing-resistant students, this was no small step. They were still inclined to grumble and ask "Why do we write all the time in here?" but most of them wrote anyway. Second, there was a general change in attitude. The heart of the rebelliousness and the belligerence had died. The occasional gripes seemed only to be left over rituals, and there was a growing sense of cohesiveness and unity.

Behavior Modification Techniques Provided the Discipline Necessary For Good Management Procedures and Self Evaluation

Eventually, we evolved a system of "accountability points" that made up the evaluation system used for figuring grades. We started by asking the students each Friday to look back over the week and write about how they saw their own participation, attitude, punctuality, etc. This was a first step in clearing up those differences in perceptions that had been such thorns in everyone's flesh. We began to see where their memories were not so accurate also. We narrowed down the areas of accountability to:

1) arriving to class on time
2) keeping up with the pace of class activities
3) completing the activities that were assigned
4) following class rules.

The bottom line was that many of these students had very

poor work habits. We felt that is was important for their future success to become reliable, conscientious workers. We also recognized that the instant reward of receiving a point for work done was a good motivator.

While we were reading a novel in class, we wanted them to know what was happening in the story and to try to relate it to themselves. We used a three-point daily evaluation system: one point for correctly answering a "pop quiz" question, one point for reading in class, and one point for writing in their journals. We kept a chart of their accumulated points which they could look at any time and see how they were doing. Later we switched to a four point system.

At one point we decided to try keeping a large chart on the wall so that each student could easily see how his or her points totalled up. It certainly attracted their attention and served as a reminder that how they spent their time in class was important.

Although no one complained, we had some misgivings about how fair it was to have a chart announcing everyone's grade in full view. After several weeks, we decided that the chart had served its purpose and we took it down. Shortly after it disappeared, students began to ask about it. "Where is that chart? Why did you take it down?" they said.

"Well, we thought maybe we shouldn't have everyone's grade up on the wall."

"Aw, naw," they said. "We liked it--cause we always

knew how we were doin."

We continued to devise and improvise point systems that fit into whatever unit we were doing. Sometimes we had to regroup and start over again. However there were very few arguments about grades because the system was always objective.

The second quarter, when it was time for interims, we asked the students to tell us what they thought they were earning. All but one student was within one grade of his actual average. There were only two F's (a considerable improvement over the first quarter). All of the students knew why they were earning the grade they received.

What Do Students Show Us About the Role of Teacher Intervention?

My students taught me a great deal about themselves and their needs through their responses, but they also helped me to understand my own role in relation to them.

1. My teaching, I found, became effective when I intervened at the stage of development where the students had ceased to progress. Until I was able to recognize their uniqueness and try to see the world through their eyes, I was unable to reach them. They were not able to achieve as long as I expected them to perform according to my preconceived

expectations and standards.

2. The students responded positively when I engaged each of them over a period of time in a relationship that built trust and, at the same time, modeled writing process. The more I became involved with writing to them in their journals, the more their writing resistance broke down. I have to think that one reason for the success of these journals was that the one-to-one contact validated their experience and perspective and let them know that they were taken seriously.

3. The students became willing to participate when an objective system of behavioral guidelines neutralized our negative interactions. It was the system which defined the boundaries of what was acceptable and what was not acceptable. Consequently, we did not need to dicker over rules and their interpretations.

When I look at the progress we made during the year, I still recall those tense moments we had in our early days together. At that time, I would never have thought that the following bit of conversation I scribbled in my journal late in the year would ever have taken place.

"Hey, Mrs. McGuire, do we have to write today?"

"Yep, we sure do!"

"Oh . . . O.K. Can I write about anything I want to?"

"Sure. Anything you want to."

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